

No People Were Harmed in the Making of This Art:

Asylum Archive and the Arts of Refusal

Alice Feldman and Vukašin Nedeljković

'refusal: a rejection of the status quo as livable and the creation of possibility in the face of negation i.e. a refusal to recognize a system that renders you fundamentally illegible and unintelligible; the decision to reject the terms of diminished subjecthood with which one is presented, using negation as a generative and creative source of disorderly power to embrace the possibility of living otherwise.' (Tina Campt, 2019)¹

Vukasin and I met in 2013 while presenting at a conference on creative practices.² Our intersecting works and compulsions around the necropolitical, racialised politics of asylum and migration justice, decoloniality, and the aest-ethical³ debates infusing the representational practices of art, knowledge and social practice became the staples of years-long conversations.

*In 2016 we presented a paper at the conference, *Risking the Future: Vulnerability, Resistance, Hope* at the University of Durham, titled 'No People Were Harmed in the Making of this Art: The Reflexive Imperative of a Decolonial Praxis'. In a sense, we were reading Richard Mosse's work, *The Enclave*, against the grain of Asylum Archive, and in conversation with current mobilisations of vulnerable BIPOC and people seeking refuge to thwart their ongoing subjection to the gaze, pursuits and projects of white western artists and art industries⁴*

We critically unpacked the aest-ethical implications of what we argued is his colonialist phantasmising and exoticisation of Congolese people and landscapes through the use of military infrared surveillance technology, and the purposely forced filming of (emphatically unwilling) black bodies by the white Irish interlocutor on a chosen mission of revealing, in his

¹ Campt, Tina. (2019). 'Black visibility and the practice of refusal. *Women and Performance*, February 25, 2019. <https://www.womenandperformance.org/ampersand/29-1/campt> (accessed: 31/7/21)

² Digital Humanities Exploratorium: Pathways to Interdisciplinarity, Creative Praxis and Digital Humanities Research, UCD Humanities Institute

³ See Tania Brughera. (2016). *The Role of Ethics in Political Art* | | Radcliffe Institute, 3 October 2016 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_x5SYh9x2tM

⁴ See Rise. (2015). '10 things you need to consider if you are an artist not of the refugee and asylum seeker community- looking to work with our community.' Oct 5, 2015, www.riserefugee.org

*estimation, a crisis largely unknown to the world, and in need of hyper-aestheticised depiction in order to be effectively impactful and understood.*⁵

Work from The Enclave was followed by the use of another, heat-sensitive military film that creates the visual effect of an xray, this time wrought upon refugees. The advertisement for an exhibition, 'Incoming', at Butler Gallery in Kilkenny this summer prompted another round of discussions regarding these issues. The imminent 2nd edition of the original 2018 publication of Asylum Archive seemed the occasion and space in which to bring that conversation into the public discourse.

I had seen still images and video clips. Hollowed eye, slack-jawed, ghostly visages. Literal de-face-ment, death masks, zombification. Slow-motion. Unreal, otherworldly. Languid, somnolent, indolent, comatose, inanimate bodies. Dead weight. Souls surveilled and captured unknowingly in their most intimate and traumatic moments, their images snatched and stolen from cowardly, hidden, distant locations.

But if we were going to be writing about it, I had to attend the show. A friend and I travelled down to Butler, Mosse's hometown and family gallery. We steeled ourselves and entered the pitch dark of the filmic installation. Our eyes adjusted. Raw flesh and bone, splayed across glaring wall-sized triptych screens, hyper- and sur-real. An autopsy. In slow motion. An autopsy?!

Mosse says

'This camera was manufactured by a multinational weapons company for use by militaries and police forces for battlefield situational awareness and long-range border enforcement. Employed for both search and rescue it can also be used as part of advanced weapon systems for tracking and targeting the enemy...[I am using it] against itself to more adequately tell the stories of the journeys of refugees landing on Europe's shores...'⁶

'In spite of the camera's initial ghostly dehumanization of the human body, we found that it offered us a very powerful tool to communicate the painful journeys of refugees, in new and unfamiliar ways that are often tender, intimate or vulnerable. We wanted to use this military surveillance tool against itself to create an immersive, humanist art form, allowing the viewer to meditate on the profoundly difficult and frequently tragic journeys of refugees'⁷

⁵ 'I thought, "Where should I take this ludicrously paletted bubble gum pink film?" And I thought for a while..." Well, I've never been to the Congo and 5.4 million people have died or been killed by war-related causes since 1998 - and that's a tonne of people. But we don't really hear about this ongoing humanitarian disaster".
Richard Mosse, *The Impossible Image*, <https://vimeo.com/67115692>

⁶ Mosse, Richard. (nd) Picturing Crisis in 'INCOMING' https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kt9_-xyG5K8

⁷ Photoworks. (nd) Interview: Incoming by Richard Mosse <https://photoworks.org.uk/incoming-richard-mosse/>

'In spite of the camera's coldly brutal function, our initial test shoot in London during 2014 also revealed a type of imagery that is extremely aesthetic. Quite by accident, the device produces a beautiful monochrome tonality; human skin is rendered as a mottled patina disclosing an intimate system of body heat. Yet the camera carries a certain aesthetic violence, stripping the individual from the body and portraying a human as mere biological trace. It does this without describing skin colour – the camera is colour-blind – registering only the contours of relative heat difference within a given scene. Mortality is foregrounded.'⁸

'The camera is designed for border control, for tracking and identifying. So it's in no way about the individual, the camera strips the individual of its identity and turns it into a biological trace, this thermal radiance of a human body, this corporeality. What I also found, was that the camera also had this potential to re-humanise due to the ability of the lens to telescope in on people, which is maybe slightly invasive, but allowed us to capture these honest moments because people just aren't aware that you're filming.'⁹

[Sean O'Hagan, critic] 'This depersonalisation provides protection for subjects: You can look at this person, to try to feel what they feel, to empathise with them...you don't even need to know their name; you don't need to see their face ...[to]...imagine' it.¹⁰

'The camera, on the other hand, often translated overly graphic material into much less disturbing footage, such as the footage shot of the pathologists on the island of Rhodes extracting DNA from the corpse of an eleven year old girl who had drowned off the island of Leros. Such a scene would be far too graphic for exhibition had it been filmed with a conventional camera, but filmed with the thermal camera, it seemed prosaic, procedural and routine.'¹¹

[In the case of filming in a detention centre] 'we put up posters within the space a few days prior to our filming, advertising our project, and the scheduled times of filming, explaining that it is a work of art made with a thermal camera that anonymizes its subject, so that

⁸ Pardo, Alona (2017) Barbican Meets: Richard Mosse Mar 2017 <https://www.barbican.org.uk/read-watch-listen/barbican-meets-richard-mosse>

⁹ Illingworth, Georgia. 2017. 'The Photographer Finding Beauty in Political Devastation'. Another Magazine, 16 February 2017. <https://www.anothermag.com/art-photography/9547/the-photographer-finding-beauty-in-political-devastation>

¹⁰ Bloomberg. 2018. Brilliant Ideas: Richard Mosse. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/videos/2018-03-19/richard-mosse-on-brilliant-ideas-video>

¹¹ Photoworks. (nd) Interview: Incoming by Richard Mosse <https://photoworks.org.uk/incoming-richard-mosse/>

anyone concerned about being identified within the film would have nothing to worry about...'¹²

'Imaging the refugee crisis in such a way may *feel* unethical – discomfiting or upsetting the viewer – but it is not. Indeed, that *feeling* of ethical violation has the potential to activate the viewer, to push them into a space where they are no longer simply consuming imagery, but where they are consciously and cautiously engaging with the work and its meaning, while checking themselves, their baggage and reflexes. This is what art is all about, and what it does strongest.'¹³

(re: the rationale cultivated in the The Enclave series): "You want to make people taste their complicity, to disturb them a little bit, to remind them of their own agency... My intention is to hold up the mirror...if you're uncomfortable seeing the work in a privileged place, you're also forced to note the imbalance of power that has created these spaces...The alternative to looking at them is to look away," he says, describing a desire to "almost weaponise the aesthetics. I want to push my work past that threshold, and that can be unsettling".¹⁴

Mosse considers his practice 'a moral imperative'¹⁵

Mosse is ardent he is not an activist, campaigner or advocate

Mosse has received the most prestigious international awards bearing significant monetary prizes

Mosse's individual images sell for tens of thousands (a skull nestled in pink vegetation for \$6-8,000 titled 'Of Lilies and Remains'; an armed man holding a baby, titled 'Madonna and Child' for \$7-9,000; two armed men in elaborate camouflage surrounded by pink vegetation, titled 'Hot Rats' for \$20-30,000¹⁶)

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid., emphasis added.

¹⁴ Tipton, Gemma 2021. Richard Mosse: 'The idea of the artist going it alone is bogus'. Irish Times Jun 5, 2021 <https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/art-and-design/visual-art/richard-mosse-the-idea-of-the-artist-going-it-alone-is-bogus-1.4579865>

¹⁵ Bloomberg. 2018. Brilliant Ideas: Richard Mosse. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/videos/2018-03-19/richard-mosse-on-brilliant-ideas-video>

¹⁶ www.invaluable.com

Mosse is hailed as a hero and humanitarian, a 'rock star'¹⁷

The Necropolitical Realities of the 'Aesthetic Violence' of Mosse's Deathworlds

Marina Gržinić observes that, in contrast to biopolitics (the power to control the conditions in which people live), necropolitics is about the power to authorise and impose the conditions of death: the manufacturing, administration and normalisation of death zones.¹⁸ This form of governmentality employs a racialised calculus of 'violently differentiated groups of beings'¹⁹ to determine who is abandoned, sacrificed as 'collateral damage'. Such decisions are authorised by the construction of a 'state of exception'²⁰ emanating from an engineered crisis, the migration crisis'.

On one hand, Gržinić argues, it is the 'empty centre' of Western biopower that funds the operation of necropolitics creating a disconnect between the machinations of governmentality and the moral or ethical 'reason' that is assumed to underpin them. At the same time, however, she illuminates the ways in which this space, far from 'empty', is actually inhabited by a perverted and inverse 'logic' whereby draconian measures are deemed 'required' in order to preserve life: war is necessary for peace; humanitarian action involves killing; incarceration is hospitality, and so on.²¹

In this way, necro-aesthetics function to invisibilise and normalise necropolitics by generating endless, repetitive imaging (quoting Ebony Rose): 'that traps black bodies in a temporal ontological prison of anti-blackness grammar and the structure of suffering'.²² The image is key to the necropolitical project, Gržinić argues, 'protecting it – by emptying it of any content'. Thus images of planetary crises of suffering and strife are circulated

¹⁷ Tipton, Gemma 2021. Richard Mosse: 'The idea of the artist going it alone is bogus'. Irish Times Jun 5, 2021 <https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/art-and-design/visual-art/richard-mosse-the-idea-of-the-artist-going-it-alone-is-bogus-1.4579865>

¹⁸ Gržinić, Marina 2018. 'What is the Aesthetics of Necropolitics?' in Natasha Lushetich (ed.) *The Aesthetics of Necropolitics*. Rowman and Littlefield, pp. 17-36.

¹⁹ Ibid. p. 17

²⁰ A state of emergency necessitating extraordinary measures. See Giorgio Agamben. 2019. *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press)

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid., p. 17. See Rose, Ebony. (2016). 'Afro-Statist: : Understanding the Necro (Bio) political Collaboration in the Creation of the Carceralization of Black Life/Death', paper presented at Conference: American Association of Geographers: San Francisco, CA.

but are present as a mirage, as an immense complexity that is incomprehensible and far removed from those living under the reign of necrocapitalism...The necropolitical regime is ultimately about death, visible or invisible. But it operates in such a way as to link aesthetics to the devastation of landscapes and bodies in order to produce the 'beauty' of death. Consequently, we have two processes that seem opposed but are, in fact, coextensive, even mutually structuring. The empty form of the image is directly related to the 'subliminal' empty form of death, *which is a mise-en-scene* of capturing death's 'beauty'.²³

Mosse's 'incoming' are already dead. Or inert, waiting to die. There is no future, so the present doesn't actually matter. No further action required. Job done. Walk away. Move on. No need to look back.

Gržinić deftly illuminates the ways the power of aesthetics and the discursive strategies of gaslighting intersect and combine to serve the necro-project. Her account exposes, in an energetically clear and nuanced way, the necropolitics of Mosse's practice, as it issues forth from his own explanations and justifications for his work, and of art-world enablers and co-conspirators. Be/aware: it is not the state manufacturing or the military committing these necropolitical crimes, it's an *artist*.

Asylum Archive and the Arts of Refusal

Alice and I were discussing recently Tina Campt's piece, 'Black Visuality and the Practice of Refusal', and she asked me, 'What does Asylum Archive refuse?'

Asylum archive refuses to take photographs of bodies of people seeking international protection. Asylum Archive refuses to document or photograph bodies in whichever way we think about that. It refuses to use portraits and bodies to expose blackness or whiteness – which seems to be very much needed in the world of journalism right now and in the artworld: to see the body suffering. To see the pain. To see the scars, right? But to see the scars with the face on.

What Asylum Archive focuses on is traces, or ghosts, or what is left behind in the context of Direct Provision where people have been deported, transferred – died. So it refuses to document or to take into the visual this discourse of suffering that is very much portrayed in the world. Rather, it focuses on what is left behind, the detritus.

I don't want to invade and intrude in the DP centres that are still open with my camera and saying you know 'Well, I am a former asylum seeker, I'm a member of MASI and maybe we share the same suffering.' No. We don't. I'm privileged because I'm white. And my time in DP was very different to time in DP for people who are black or brown. I am a survivor of DP and that's a fact. I did spend two years and seven months, but that is a relatively small amount of time.

²³ Ibid. p. 31

We're looking into the oral histories here -- into what a person has told me. Again I have to go back to myself, to my dusa and say, 'This is my experience', and other people have their own experiences. And I think my achievement, in a way, is that I'm in touch with some of people who lived in direct provision with me at the time. And I think that's just lovely because every single one of them has their own story of survival, of coming out of the incarceration, surviving Ballyhaunis with a smile on their faces. Broken faces.

I don't want to see myself as unique or Asylum Archive as some sort of 'saviour'.

And I think my biggest achievement is that, since 2019 Digital Repository of Ireland hosts the Archive, which means that it is preserved for the future generations to come.

For Asylum Archive, it is the very absence of the bodies of people seeking asylum that preserves their humanity; the withholding of their visualisation that animates their agency; the opacity that honours their subjecthood; maintaining their power to forever haunt by replacing them in context:

Asylum Archive

Invites us to seek, to ask:

What *happened* here?

What happened *here*?

What *is* this *place*?

What *was* this place?

Where are the people?

What happened to them *here*?

What happened to them?

Why?

Asylum Archive

begs *not* the question, 'Who am I?', but 'How is my existence, my being, implicated in the conditions of others?'²⁴

²⁴ See Icaza, Rosalba and Rolando Vasquez. (2013). 'Social Struggles as Epistemic Struggles.' *Development and Change* 44(3): 683–704.

Asylum Archive

Invites us to refuse! To reject necropolitical disavowals, falsifications and gaslighting.

Asylum Archive

Invites us to demand! To demand accountability. Of art. Of ourselves as makers and creators, tellers and witnesses.

Asylum Archive

Provokes

Why do you need Black Death?